

Worksession

Agenda Item #	8
Meeting Date	October 25, 2004
Prepared By	Rob Inerfeld Senior Planner
Approved By	Barbara B. Matthews City Manager

Discussion Item	Metropolitan Branch Trail
Background	<p>The Council is being asked to consider the use of capital improvement funds (\$80,000) allocated by Montgomery County through its Annual Bikeway Program for the completion of the Takoma Park section of the Metropolitan Branch Trail. The funds must be expended within the relatively near future.</p> <p>All but a 366-foot section of the trail was constructed during the first phase of the project, completed last fall. Due to funding shortfalls, the City was unable to construct a boardwalk originally planned for this section of the trail and a 6-foot wide stone dust trail was installed on a temporary basis until additional resources could be secured.</p> <p>It is now possible, with the funds allocated by the County, to complete the trail. Several options on how this can be done within budget have been considered by City staff and presented to members of the original work group. The funding does not allow for the construction of the proposed boardwalk (estimated at a cost of \$140,000). As an alternative, City staff has proposed that an asphalt trail be constructed with the remaining funds used for additional fencing, landscaping, and possible installations of public art and/or interpretive signage.</p> <p>It should be noted that the boardwalk was originally proposed as a means of providing protection to several large trees located along the trail. Unfortunately, during the construction of the first phase of the project, the contractor excavated and compacted soils in an area two to three feet beyond the limits of construction, damaging some of the existing trees along the stone dust trail. Once the damage was discovered, the contractor was ordered to conduct vertical mulching in all disturbed areas along this section of the trail. The City Arborist determined that, while the trees had suffered some damage, they are likely to survive. It is the Arborist's opinion that the proposed construction will not negatively impact the health of the trees beyond the damage that took place last year.</p>
Policy	<p>To “provide for safe, pleasant and convenient bicycle access that contributes to the quality of life” (through construction of) the “Metropolitan Branch Trail as a direct and continuous trail for pedestrians and bicyclists.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Takoma Park Master Plan, 2000.</p>
Fiscal Impact	The project would be entirely paid for with County funds.
Attachments	Summary of community input received.
Recommendation	Authorize City staff to work with Montgomery County to complete the Metropolitan

	Branch Trail as an eight-foot wide asphalt trail with a railing between the trail and street.
Special Consideration	

Community input received regarding Metropolitan Branch Trail:

From Carol Lindeman:

Rob,

The plan sounds great. I'll try and make the meeting on Thursday.

Paving sounds OK to me. I think there should be a span of some kind over the lowest point on the trail so that water has a place to go.

When we have heavy rain the speed table dams the water to the east on Takoma Ave.

Is there any news on the DC section of the trail?

Carol

From Jim Sebastian:

Rob -

Sounds like paving makes sense. That should mean less long term maintenance too. I suppose we could make this section slightly narrower if bret thinks it will make a difference for the trees. in my opinion a 3 foot buffer is plenty for a road with those speeds and volumes.

-jim

James R. Sebastian
Bicycle Program Manager
District Department of Transportation

From Roland Halstead:

I may not be able to make the meeting. However, I'm in favor of your proposal for using the \$80,000 to finish the trail segment with asphalt and adding other amenities such as signage and historical/art enhancements. As a regular user of the trail, I look forward to a less cramped segment, now that more pedestrians and bicyclists are getting acquainted with this attractive and functional transportation/recreation resource. Since the contractor already did the damage to the root system of the trees and the asphalt will not add further deterioration, let's just go forward without the boardwalk. It may be better for winter use, anyway.

Roland.

From Pierre Donahue:

Rob --

This is good news indeed. Not sure I'll be able to make it to the meeting, but I would like to pass along my views, which are as follows.

1) I don't feel strongly about the asphalt vs. boardwalk; I trust the city arborist, and if he believes that the cheaper asphalt approach will work, then I'm all in favor.

2) I DO feel strongly that the current arrangement along the current stone dust portion of the trail is dangerous. It is simply too close to the roadway. If a kid were to fall off of his/her bike the wrong way, they could easily land directly in oncoming traffic. The original design was for a boardwalk with a railing that would have protected against this. If the asphalt trail will continue to be as

close to the roadway as the current stone dust portion is, then I believe that some kind of (attractive) barrier ought to be put up between the road and the trail in this small section. I think that this is far more important than "installations of public art and interpretive signage." It's also more important than landscaping, unless the landscaping takes the form of creating a barrier (like a line of trees -- though I don't see how there would be enough space for this approach).

Thanks.

-- Pierre

P.S. -- The drainage for the raised walkway has never been fixed, and every time it rains substantially, there is still a pool of water several inches deep on the south side of the speed hump. Is anyone looking into this?

From Michael Jackson (State bicycle coordinator):

Dear Mr. Inerfeld:

For what ever value my opinion carries I support the asphalt trail proposal.

If there is a curb in place between the roadway edge and the trail then the 5 foot wide buffer recommendation is not as important as the curb serves as physical barrier.

Michael Jackson

From Mark Freedman:

I can help answer that question. The current usage of the trail that I have seen is close to nothing. For example, on Sunday, mid-day, glorious fall day, my wife and I walked up to the new college bridge from Baltimore Ave. We walked the entire length of the trail, but not on the trail. We walked on the pre-existing sidewalk on the other side of the street. It's a much nicer walk when one can look at the houses and watch the kids playing in the park. We saw no one on the trail the entire time. We only used the trail north of Fenton where it connects to the trail the college built (the stone dust path is south of Fenton across from Jecquie park).

The same has been true on other weekend days and weekdays. Rarely do I ever see anyone on the trail. I have seen some people on the trail, and now that there is construction at the college, I'm more apt to get on the trail once I get to

I expect that will change when the D.C. section is built and the Silver Spring section is built, but I don't think that D.C. has even decided what route their section will take.

Yours,
Mark

From Jim Evans:

Richard Weil and I were at the Trail both Saturday and Sunday for 2 to 3 hours each day. Saturday the Trail was used by both cyclists and pedestrians. Strangely, on Sunday both the Trail and Jecquie Park were almost completely devoid of people on what Mark correctly describes as a beautiful fall day. However, my experience and observations differ from Mark's on nearly all other occasions. The Trail is used regularly during weekdays, both morning and afternoon. Many of the users appear to be students at Montgomery College and others going to and from the Metro, walking dogs, cycling or otherwise recreating. While not as busy as the Capital Crescent Trail, I think the use is more than reasonable considering that adjacent sections of the Trail are not yet in place and destinations are therefore very limited.

I would also differ with Mark on the aesthetics. The view from the Trail affords the same scenery, albeit from a bit further. On the other hand, using the Trail one can enjoy the scenery without having to be careful not trip over raised and broken sections of concrete and there are no busy intersections to cross.

Jim

From Mark Freedman:

I'm glad to hear that the trail is being used more than I had observed already. I want to thank Rob and Brett for organizing the meeting last night. I believe that it was informative for everyone.

Yours,
Mark

Dear Rob,

Thank you for including me on this message. I believe that I was BCC'd on this e-mail. As such, I'm responding to the entire e-mail group shown, and adding Lorraine Pearsall, Sabrina Baron, Frances Phipps and Jim Evans. Please forgive the length of this message. I know that some of the folks reading this are new to the issue and I want to provide some background. I should also note that I think that the trail as built so far is very nice. While I have a number of roles in our community, I am writing entirely on my own behalf and not for any organization, commission, or otherwise.

Thank you for the concise summary of the current situation and proposal. I believe that we have a hard choice to make.

To answer your question, I believe that the City of Takoma Park should not spend any more funds on this trail unless it is part of a budget developed in advance as part of annual planning. From day one we were told that this trail was a gift--outside money paid for it and we got to design it. As we invested more time and money (staff time is money to me), we learned that was the first of many things that turned out to be wrong. I would much rather have the stone dust trail for years to come than skip on the wayfinding signs and downtown landscaping that our commercial district has so desperately needed. Living by the trail for an entire spring and summer, I can attest to the fact that it has very little use--the stone dust trail has not been problematic (if use were higher the problem would be people have to dismount for the more narrow section).

I also do not believe that it would be appropriate to further damage the trees there that we have spent so much time and money to protect. As I understand it, tree preservation is a very inexact science. Given our past experience, it seems very unlikely that the tree damage will be as small as predicted. I think that waiting for a future opportunity for more appropriate funding is far preferable to changing plans at this late stage. The trail already suffers from last minute changes and alterations.

Furthermore, it does not appear that the D.C. section of the trail will be built for years, nor will the Silver Spring hook up and tunnel. As such, it doesn't make sense to continue to invest in our A++ trail that does not connect at either end to any trails whatsoever (hence the lack of use). We can build the boardwalk when the other sections of the larger trail are in progress (when hopefully tax revenues are up with a better economy).

Regarding the \$80,000 for the trail, I think it's very problematic that Mr. Perez was asked to make this a priority at this time. There's a corellary to the addage about "looking a gift horse in the mouth." It's "Don't take the horse if you need a cow." The number of more important Takoma Park projects that he could have been advocating for are too numerous to mention. I say this with no disrespect to this trail, but rather with a sense of the

larger needs of our community. I would much rather ask Mr. Perez to have this reprogrammed than to spend it on the trail at this stage. Furthermore, I'd rather turn down this money than have it added to the list of what "Takoma Park already got." It belittles our far more important needs, and gives an impression that our priorities are skewed.

I believe that the trail plans call for a fence and other elements in addition to the boardwalk. If turning down the \$80,000 would be bad for us politically, then I would suggest that it be used for the fence and other elements. We've already made a one stage project into a two stage one. Why not extend it to a three stage one? Additionally, there are existing problems with the trail as built. For example, the speed table was built on Takoma Ave. with no drainage. As such, water pools there and forms a safety hazard. We need to fix that. I expect that we would have no trouble spending \$80,000 on the trail. Furthermore, if we budget to spend \$50,000, then maybe we'll only spend \$80,000.

The rest of this message is about how we got here and asks how we'll avoid this kind of mess in the future.

The project, which came in way over budget, was approved for two stages. In stage one, trees were damaged when the contractors didn't follow instructions that were the result of large amounts of money and time in planning (and apparently were not supervised sufficiently by the City). Now, building on that damage, stage two (the boardwalk which was designed at considerable cost of time and money) may be eliminated based on the contractor's damage to the trees. Additionally, there is the fact that by skipping the boardwalk, we can save money (off the project that's way over budget) to do other things. I'll note that the contractor selected was below the other bidders by a considerable amount. There were concerns at the time that the low bid might indicate a poorer quality of work--that appears to have been true with regards to at least this issue.

Instead of making hard choices in the design phase, we were sold on plans that offered to make everything work, but were completely unrealistic on the numbers. Already the design has been tweaked and altered in hodge-podge ways to accommodate reality.

Once again, I find myself marvelling at the fact that there was one person who, throughout this process, predicted with frightening precision most of what went wrong: Frances Phipps. I moved here in 2000 when the project was still in planning stages. At the time, I believed the assurances of the City and trail advocates that Ms. Phipps's concerns were exaggerated. She was right. I have apologized to her.

As you know, I live on Baltimore Ave, just a few houses down from where the Maryland section of this trail meets with the D.C. section. As a regular metro user, lapsed cyclist, future parent, conservationist, and community preservationist, I struggled with the many difficult issues that this trail presented. In the end I did not oppose the final design, but I was angered and hurt by how often we were told things that turned out to be completely wrong. Hard decisions were made hastily because we didn't have accurate information until the 11th hour.

When I first moved here, we were told in a North Takoma neighborhood meeting that there was plenty of room for keeping the parking for Jeque park, all the major trees, and putting in the trail. Ms. Phipps was already pointing out that it was impossible to do that--all one had to do was take a measuring tape and check the space we had to work with. In the end we lost the parking, lost some (maybe more) trees and the trail isn't even complete. There were three major setbacks, each one of which was maddening. First, the consultant provided us with the reality that we'd have to make hard choices because of the limited space. Second, when bids came in we learned that the consultant's numbers were off by a huge factor--we had to make even more hard choices while we paid the consultant more money to adjust the plans. Then during construction, the careful plans for tree preservation were ignored and not enforced.

Had we been given realistic information at the beginning, we might have been able to make the hard choices about current tree loss, parking for the park, etc. vs. new tree plantings, long term trail design, etc. Instead, we have a piecemeal result and considerable hostility within the community over it.

I hope that in the future consultants and contractors will have agreements with the city that include appropriate constraints and penalties for these kinds of mistakes. I also hope that suspiciously low bids will be more carefully scrutinized.

Sincerely yours,
Mark Freedman
7311 Baltimore Ave.